A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]

Rated: Fiction T (https://www.fictionratings.com/) - English - Sci-Fi/Friendship - General Grievous, OC - Chapters: 53 - Words: 542,002 - Reviews: 1,397 (/r/11714223/) - Favs: 1,321 - Follows: 1,431 - Updated: Aug 19, 2022 - Published: Jan 4, 2016 - id: 11714223

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Author's note: Haha, you actually thought I'd deliver something on time! But you were tricked, because it's me, Timewatch! I never deliver anything on time! But to make up for it, have a chapter that's nearly 10K words in length.

Chapter 19

"Sure was nice of Senator Amidala to lend us her private landing platform, right Ventress?" asked Ahsoka.

"Yes, it was," sighed Asajj.

"And what are you going to say to her?"

"I'm going to thank her properly," Asajj said, grimacing at the notion.

Banshee touched down on the Senator's platform, floating some distance off from the glittering apartment complex where Ahsoka said she lived. Asajj supposed that Amidala was the brown-haired woman in the voluminous black dress. And the little green thing at her side... *Master Yoda,* Asajj thought, a foreboding feeling coming over her. It'd been a while since they last met, under very different circumstances.

Clone captain Rex led the way out, being wedged between Kenobi and the rear bulkhead as he was. Ahsoka followed Kenobi, Asajj followed Ahsoka, and R2-D2 the astromech droid popping out of the storage compartment under the gunship's deck plating, each emerging from the gunship in sequence, like a troop of clowns coming out of a comically small landspeeder. The droid even beeped loudly to announce their arrival.

I can't believe I've come to this, thought Asajj, frowning at the scene. Ahsoka rushed forward and threw her arms around Amidala, Obi-wan followed more gracefully. The astromech droid shot straight to a golden-plated protocol droid and immediately struck up a conversation. Did everyone here know each other?

Captain Rex and Asajj were left standing by the ship. "I'm not one for emotional reunions," Rex said.

"Me either," agreed Asajj. But she got the feeling Rex was actually making sure she didn't suddenly run off or try to kill anyone. For a while, they all talked with each other, and mercifully left Asajj out of the proceedings. *It's strange, being up here,* she thought, looking at the elegant and gleaming skyline of the district. Usually when she was on Coruscant, she was dozens if not hundreds of levels below the surface, stuck in the perpetual gloom, grime, and grinding poverty of the undercity. But up here, she could almost believe that this place really did deserve to be the center of the galaxy.

Almost.

The two Jedi and Ahsoka approached them at last. "Asajj Ventress," Yoda said in his ancient gravely voice, "a long time, it has been."

"Master Yoda," said Asajj, forcing herself to use his title. As much as she disliked the Jedi, she needed their help to get a pardon.

"Last time we met, tried to kill me, you did," said Yoda, with an amused little smirk. "Had a change of heart, have you?"

Does he always speak like this? Asajj wondered. "You can call it that," she said. "The dark side wasn't working out for me. I decided to switch things up, try something new."

"Or something old, perhaps," said Yoda. "In the beginning, nothing was evil. Returned to your roots, you have."

"Yeah, whatever," Asajj said, waving her hand. "I only did this so I could get a pardon. Something Ahsoka Tano here promised I'd get for helping prove her innocence. Didn't work out, as you can see."

"And here I was thinking you just couldn't live without my charm and wit," said Kenobi, stroking his beard. Asajj gave him a ferocious glare.

"Talk to the Council and Senate, we will," Yoda said. "But first, learn we must of your adventure, and the appearance of a lost child."

"Esera Komara," said Ahsoka. A troubled look came over her face.

"Yes, she," said Yoda. "Young Ventress, Ahsoka, and Captain Rex too, come with us, I ask of you. Find out what happened on Grievous's ship, we must."

They didn't have much of a choice. Asajj got a closer look at Senator Amidala as they were departing, while Kenobi and Ahsoka went to exchange a few more words with her. She had a sad look to her, but determined, and fierce in her own way. *I wonder what her story is,* Asajj thought. The motley assembly took a larger speeder to the Jedi Temple, the last place Asajj ever imagined herself going.

"If this is a trap, I'm going down fighting," she announced. "You'll never take me alive."

"No trap, no trap," said Yoda, shaking his little green head. "My word, you have."

That'd have to do. She'd come this far, there was no turning back now.

The sound of soft speaking woke Esera. Her breathing was no longer so difficult, and the pain in her hand had faded. Whoever was speaking was someone she'd never heard, but he wasn't a Nemoidian, he lacked their accent and intonation.

"You must be careful with those moving parts," said the medical droid.

"She's the one who bit me," said the person.

"Vulture droids do not have mouths, it cannot have bitten you," the medical droid said.

"She caught my hand between her head and her hull, what else would you call it?"

"Pinching."

That seemed to end their conversation. Esera pushed herself up, head spinning as she raised it, and took a look at the visitor. It was the other Human! He'd hurt his hand, and was dressed in a dirty, ill-fitting jumpsuit with faded Confederate hexagons poorly patched onto the shoulders. A curious sight sat upon his face: a device that looked somewhere between magnifying glasses for precision work, and a heads-up display. Maybe it did both.

Esera tried to speak but only ended up coughing. The medical droid and the Human both looked at her blankly; because one was a droid, and the other was expressionless.

"Uh, hello," Esera said weakly.

The Human stared for just long enough that the silence became awkward. "Hello," he said.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What are you doing here?" Vaguely, Esera was aware that she was being rude, but the painkillers were muting her judgment along with her senses.

"Miha Voyan," said he. "The droid mechanic."

"Isn't that a girl's name?" Esera asked, because there'd been a girl at the Temple named Miha. The mechanic's mouth turned ever-so-slightly downwards.

"Not where I'm from," he said.

"Why are you here?"

Voyan stared at her in silence again. "The Vulture droid bit me," he said, raising up a hand now encased in a bacta patch.

"I see..." The mechanic had taken that question very literally. "But, like... why are you a Human, on this ship?" Those words sounded fine in Esera's head, but once she spoke them, they didn't seem quite right. Voyan was confused.

"Is she high?" he asked the medical droid.

"The Jedi intruders cut off her hand and shot her," the droid said. "She is on a heavy dose of pain-numbing chemicals with intoxicating side effects."

"That's rough," said Voyan. And that was the end of their conversation, he finished his business in the medical bay and returned to work on the Vulture droids. *Did I make a bad impression?* Esera wondered. He'd been there in the mess hall the other week... Maybe he disliked her because of her view on the war.

Esera spent another two days recovering. While she had no clear memory of Grievous checking in on her, she'd sensed his presence very close a few times. It was nice to know he cared, in his own way. To distract herself from the lonely boredom of the medbay and her humiliating defeat at the hands of Ahsoka Tano, Esera thought about who he'd once been. Khagan Qymaen, supreme warlord of Kalee. What little she'd gleaned from the holonet said that he'd had ten wives and thirty legitimate children, and a whole slew more that claimed they were illegitimate.

A lot of the posters on *m11talk·rax* didn't think they were real. Qymaen had never been known to be unfaithful. There were rumors that Qymaen had been in love with a fellow warrior, an anonymous swordswoman, but she had died in battle against the huk. If ten wives could not fill the void she left in his heart, how could any other woman? Qymaen's – or rather, Grievous's – eight surviving children all seemed to respect him as a father, though. He had been stern and tough with them, that was for sure. In an interview Esera watched, she saw one his sons boast that their father had beat him with the branch of a tree for talking back to his mother; his brother then boasted their father had beat him with the *entire* tree for talking back to hismother! Esera wondered why they were so proud of this. Among most Humans, that would have been considered abusive.

Different race, different culture, Esera thought. It wasn't worth getting upset over the practices of an alien race. Those eight children were all boys, and they were all serving their people one way or another. One was a priest in the service of the current Khagan, Zharajayn; a good omen as seen by the Kaleesh. The thought of putting one of Qymaen's sons in charge of the war hadn't crossed their mind, though; Kaleesh got by on merit, not blood relations. They were truly an interesting people. *What do I do with this information, though?* wondered Esera. *Does Grievous know they're alive? Would he even care? Do they know he's alive? Would they care?*

But ultimately, a distraction was a distraction, and that was just what her quest to learn more about Grievous was. When she turned off the shadowfeed, and the lights in the medbay dimmed down, the thoughts she'd been trying to escape came upon her. She stared up at the ceiling in silence, like she did every night. *I almost liked being on the battlefield more,* Esera thought. *At least I was too tired to remember.*

And remember she did. No matter what she tried to focus on, no matter how much she tried to clear her mind and meditate, her thoughts always to what she'd seen, and what she'd never see again. The sight of death on a dozen different worlds passed before her eyes, from the soldiers torn to pieces on Tarhassan to the militiamen of Shumavar who'd vomited out their lungs as their cellars and bunkers filled with gas. She saw the faces she'd never see again in the flesh, friends from her days at the Temple who'd been cut down one by one, strangers she'd only met in passing before their moment came, and more than any other, the man who'd tried to make a worthy woman out of a frightened and useless girl. Never in a thousand years would her master have resorted to the dark side. He never would have let his enemies infuriate him so. He would have borne the accusations of the Jedi no matter how false, and found a way to explain everything instead of giving into anger and hate. How disappointed would he be, right now? Esera had failed to learn what he tried to teach her in every possible way.

And when she finally found sleep, after hours in the dark, she dreamed. What she dreamed, she seldom remembered, but she woke in a sweat, feeling anxious and exhausted. Then, she stared at the ceiling some more. Before her incident with Ahsoka Tano, Esera had been experiencing all this. But now, it was worse than ever. *What can I do for this galaxy when I can't even help myself?* Esera wondered. *What's one stupid, scared little girl against a world like this? Strength and power are all that matters, even to the Jedi, and I've got neither. I don't matter one bit.* And though she knew this, she knew couldn't change who she was.

It was in this grim mood that Esera was discharged from the medbay. She took the turbolift up to Grievous's tower to report in, fidgeting with her reattached hand all the while. Her wrist and fingers were stiff, like they didn't want to move, and her hand had seemingly random spasms and twitches. There was a reason mechanical prosthetics were so much more widespread in the galaxy.

"I've been waiting," Grievous said, the moment she stepped onto the elevated elevator deck. Snow-covered Raxus stretched out under the vast windows. The cyborg was in his chair, turned away from her, looking out over the planet.

"Well, here I am," Esera said, approaching his desk.

"How is your hand?" Grievous asked, turning around in his chair.

"Stiff, but mostly working. The droid said that the cauterized nerve endings might never fully heal, that it would have been smarter to get a prosthetic hand," said Esera, momentarily surprised by his consideration. But this was Grievous, he wasn't actually being considerate.

"Unfortunate," sighed Grievous. "I was hoping to make a fighter of you, sooner than later. It's a shame you insisted on keeping your hand, my doctor specializes in cybernetics. Regardless, you will learn to use your left hand as well as you used your right hand."

"I don't know about that," Esera said. She stared down at her hand, watching her fingers struggle to make a tight fist.

"You make it sound as if you have a choice," said Grievous. He leaned forward. "You don't."

Now Esera faced the subject she'd been avoiding thinking about for the past few days. "I don't like fighting," she said. "I'm not good at it. I've never been good at it. All I've done for three years is fight, and what has it gotten me? Everyone I cared about is dead, I've betrayed everything I'm supposed to stand for, my hand will never work right again, each night I lay awake for hours-" Esera caught herself, and took a deep breath. "Fighting has gotten me nothing."

"When I was your age, I didn't have the luxury of such self-reflection," Grievous said.

"Yeah, well, I'm not you, and I'll never be," Esera told him. "I'm sorry I wasn't raised in a swamp or jungle or whatever under attack by alien slavers for my whole life, and I'm sorry I can't be the heartless, soulless machine you want me to be. You're never going to make me into another Ventress or Krell."

"Last time we talked, I told you that I didn't want you going over to the dark side," sighed Grievous. "I don't have time for such foolishness."

"Are you even listening to me?" asked Esera.

"The impudence of teenage girls never changes," Grievous muttered, narrowing his eyes. "I do not ask you to give up your morals or values. I command you to improve your skills so that trash like Ahsoka Tano will never have you at their mercy again."

"And I think you're kicking at water," said Esera. "I got crippled in my first ever real fight, what makes you think I'll ever have talent or skill?"

"Skywalker lost his arm to the Count when they first clashed, and look how their rivalry ended," Grievous said. "You misunderstand my intentions. My goal is not to turn you into a killer, but someone who can help herself when she's in trouble. I want self-reliance and confidence above all else from you. Is that understood?"

To be truthful with herself, Esera was surprised Grievous was actually trying to explain his reasoning, instead of just telling her what she was going to do. That dampened her frustration. "Yes," Esera said, glaring at the cyborg anyway. "I still think you're asking the impossible. Just send me to go negotiate with some government somewhere, I'll be of more used to you than I would fighting Jedi."

"Didn't I tell you to stop reading my mind?"

"I'm not- wait, what?"

Grievous stood up, and went to look down on the planet. The snow of Raxus made him into a dark silhouette against the expanse of white and blue below. "We need a victory, with more to show for it than a dead dictator or captured traitors. Something more concrete for the war effort. One of my officers identified an overlooked region that Dooku had refused to attack. What do you know of the Corporate Sector?"

"Not much," said Esera. "Money is law out there, that's about it. Jedi never went there."

"And Zygerria?"

"A sad ruin full of former slavers seething about having lost their slaves, until recently," Esera said, frowning at the very mention of the place. "I'm afraid their new operations were not halted with the death of their queen."

"No, they weren't," said Grievous. "It's an embarrassment to the Confederacy and an insult to me that they continue to be associated with us. As you said, I grew up under the threat of slavers. I no longer have to tolerate them."

"So, where do I come into this?"

The cyborg stood still. "Nothing would make me happier than to bomb that wretched planet into slag. But I would lose your loyalty and have to kill you to protect my secrets, and that would be disappointing. A more pragmatic, if less satisfying option, would be to annex Zygerria directly into the Confederacy and... convince them to see the error of their ways. And then convince the Corporate Sector to surrender and keep some of their wealth intact while we take the rest, instead of killing them and taking *all* of their wealth. Which would make me very happy to do."

"Ah." Esera got a sudden sinking feeling in her stomach. Getting a people who had practiced slavery for a thousand years to give up on their tradition was not the kind of negotiation she'd imagined taking part in.

"I could very easily take my new battleship and carve a path of destruction and terror though these regions," Grievous said. "But I want to give you a chance to do it your way. Prove to me that there are alternatives. This seems to matter a lot to you."

"Yes," agreed Esera. "This," she touched her lightsaber's hilt, "is the Jedi's last resort."

"But you're not a Jedi."

For a few moments, Esera stood silently. *I'm not a Jedi,* she thought. That was obvious. The Order had expelled her, the Jedi thought she was a dark sider, the Republic wanted her for high treason; why exactly was she still living with the morality of her previous life? In her heart, though, she knew the answer. "My master taught me how to live," said Esera, trying to keep her voice steady. Ahsoka's words came back to her; trick or not, she'd been right. "How to live rightly, I mean. And a lot of that is tied up with being a Jedi, that's true, and I know I'm not one anymore. But it's up to me if I honor or disgrace his memory, and I'm going to honor it. Whether you agree or not."

"I understand," Grievous said, nodding.

Do you even know why? Esera wanted to ask him, thinking of that anonymous swordswoman. "So you see, then, how this constant war and killing isn't working for me?"

"You would have to tell me more of your master," Grievous said. "I would like to know if he was as wise as you make him sound."

Esera swallowed. That wound was still raw in her heart. She opened her mouth, but stopped. *I can't talk about him without crying,* she thought. *And I don't want to cry in front of Grievous ever again. He only respects strength.* "I'm not ready to go there, yet," she said.

"Very well. Go read up on Zygerria and the Corporate Sector. This will be your first mission, Komara. Pray that your diplomatic skills are not as lacking as your combat skills."

On the elevator down from the tower, Esera realized that Grievous had used her name for the first time, maybe ever. She didn't know how to feel about that. For all his faults and issues, Grievous was the only creature on this ship who cared about her. That the horrible cyborg was her one companion who could speak back to her made her feel even more lonely.

Returning to the Temple was something out of a dream for Obi-wan. He hadn't been home for months upon months, since the last round of knighting ceremonies. Everything had been different back then. The end of the war was in sight, Dooku and Palpatine were both alive, and so was Anakin, and everything seemed... well, not better, but perhaps clearer. Now, the Temple was emptier than he'd ever seen it, more like a ghost town than the center of the Jedi Order. Mace Windu and Shaak Ti greeted them at the Temple landing pad, the two highest ranked masters still on Coruscant.

"Where is everyone?" Asajj Ventress asked in a low voice. Her back was as straight as a board, and she was constantly looking around, like she expected to be attacked.

"The Jedi are spread across the galaxy," said Shaak Ti. "There's only so many of us."

Obi-wan didn't miss the awkward and tense silence from Ahsoka. She still wasn't over what had happened last year. And truthfully, Obi-wan did not blame her. Ahsoka had been wronged, and she was young and full of emotion, untempered by time and experience. Perhaps one day she'd find it in her heart to forgive the Order, but not today.

Each of the participants in the rescue was debriefed on their own. No one doubted their honesty, but their escape was no ordinary mission. Their encounter with Esera Komara seemed to have piqued the Council's interest, and they wanted the full story as each of them saw it. Asajj made quite the fuss over being alone in a room with several Jedi masters, but yielded in the end.

"If I die," she said, pointing at Obi-wan before she went up to the Council chamber, "I'm going to haunt you to the end of the galaxy."

"I fully expect you to," said Obi-wan.

For Obi-wan's debriefing, the entire Council was gathered, in person and by hologram. They all sat in session in the Council chamber. He told them exactly what happened... or at least, what he remembered in his fatigued and hungry state. "That was the strangest thing," Obi-wan said in his conclusion, "Grievous just didn't seem as angry as usual. He fought smartly. For Grievous. I suppose it would have been smarter to vent us in to space or not give me lightsaber back, at least. He was very fixated on killing us with his own hands."

"But more fixated on saving Komara," said Ki-Adi Mundu.

"So it would seem," agreed Obi-wan. "When we parted ways, Grievous said... 'He who comes to us as a guest will know no fear, but he who comes sword in hand, shall perish by the sword.' It was uncharacteristically fair of him."

"That sounds like hospitality law," Shaak Ti said. "It's common in less-industrialized cultures, like Kalee."

"He's never cared about his old home before," Mace Windu said. "Why would he now? Something's changed."

"Proof of that, Komara's presence is," said Yoda, leaning forward in concentrated thought. "A troubling development, I see. Seldom does Grievous spare his victims." All eyes turned to Shaak Ti, who frowned and avoided their glances.

"Tano and Ventress both confirmed they sensed the dark side in her," said Ki-Adi. "And so did you, Master Obi-wan."

"Yes, I did," said Obi-wan, stroking his now-trimmed beard. "In hindsight, though, I don't think we got the full story." Mace raised his eyebrow, and Obi-wan continued. "Is there anyone here who knew Komara, while she was here?"

"I'm afraid not," Shaak Ti said. "She was a very quiet and withdrawn girl, she had few friends. The younglings who were somewhat close to her back then have all died in the war, sadly. And Olor Callo died too."

"Callo was unorthodox," said Mace. "Do you think his teachings had something to do with this turn of events?"

"No," said Obi-wan. "I didn't know Olor well, our age difference was a bit too much of a barrier when we were padawans, but he looked up to Master Qui-gon a lot. They shared some ideas, disagreed in other places, but nothing I heard ever made me think he leaned towards the dark side."

"He certainly didn't, and to entertain the notion is absurd," Shaak Ti said, waving a hand. "I did know Olor. He considered getting into fights a personal failure on his part. Ironic, given his frequent lack of sobriety... and celibacy." The Togruta grimaced. "He was a flawed Jedi, but those flaws were not spiritual."

"These two sound like they were completely different," said Ki-Adi. "Perhaps Callo's eccentricities pushed Komara away from the Order's ideals?"

"I think we're overlooking something important here," Obi-wan cut in. "Komara said she stopped someone from bombarding a planet, and that's why she betrayed the Republic."

"She was partnered with Ardabur Aspar, at Shumavar," said Mace. "He gave his report on the incident in person while you were absent. Admiral Holt had ordered surgical strikes from orbit on Separatist strongholds. Big enough to scare them into submission but precise enough to cause minimal collateral damage. But Komara unleashed a Separatist virus into the fleet's computers, leaving it defenseless for hours on the front lines."

"That's not the story I heard," Obi-wan said, frowning. *In person, he said.* That meant the Council had reason to believe someone was lying, and they wanted to sense it.

"Who do we believe? The Jedi we know told the truth, or a traitor who we know fell the dark side?" asked Ki-Adi. "I'm sure Komara thinks she did the right thing, and that was how she tried to make her actions appear to you. But the dark side twists everything. Even the best intentions lead to the worst ends."

"Indeed," Yoda said. "But clouds everything as well, the dark side does. Wary we must be."

Obi-wan folded his hands and looked at the floor. *If only I've been in a clearer state of mind,* he thought. Something didn't add up here. Yes, he'd sensed the dark side growing in Komara during their face-off as she told her story. But deception? No, not a hint of it. Just anger and frustration blossoming into hatred. *She was telling the truth, I'm sure of it,* Obi-wan thought. Had she deluded herself into wholeheartedly believing her own cover story? Or had this Ardabur Aspar lied to the Council's faces with no one being the wiser? Either way, one of them had gotten away with blatant falsities. That no one had been able to tell, Obi-wan included, that they'd been tricked was a troubling portent.

"The dark side clouds everything," he muttered, repeating Yoda's words. "Someone's fooling us, and not a single one of us can tell who it is."

"It's gotten worse," said Shaak Ti. "There is a turmoil in the Force, like mud kicked up at the bottom of a river, or oil spreading across water."

"Strong, it has been, since the recent battle here," agreed Yoda. "Happened, something has. But know not I."

"Perhaps it was Dooku's death," Mace suggested.

"Or Skywalker's," said Ki-Adi.

"I hardly think Anakin's death would release that much dark side energy," Obi-wan said, giving the other master a tired look. "And Dooku wasn't any stronger than him in the Force."

"Perhaps that Sith lord we've been looking for died during the battle," Shaak Ti said.

The Council was silent for a moment, contemplating the absurdity of that statement. "I doubt that," Mace said. "This Sidious has slipped by us since we learned of his existence. He wouldn't be killed by happenstance. If he was on Coruscant during the battle, then he was as far as he could possibly be from the fighting."

Maybe Palpatine released that dark side energy into the Force, thought Obi-wan in with grim humor. The idea that that old politician had been Sidious was even more ridiculous than the notion the elusive Sith had died in the battle. But then again, if the Jedi Council was so blinded by the dark side that they couldn't even tell which of two people was lying to their faces, then how could they hope to to find the Sith lord supposedly behind the whole war?

Suddenly, Obi-wan wasn't feeling so comfortable.

Operation Heist was the name Grievous settled on for the Confederacy's annexation of the Corporate Sector and surrounding regions. Because, it really would be a heist, with all the materiel he hoped to gain from it. He'd drawn out an entire plan for the days to come, all he needed now was someone to execute it. Unfortunately, skilled commanders were in low supply.

Super tactical droids were in low supply, too. The A-types were defective and not to be trusted, but the production series K-types had proved themselves time and again. Kalani was leading a vicious defense of Agamar, his heedless use of chemical weapons and the conscription of every able-bodied male between fourteen and sixty-four into the planetary army had inflicted such casualties on the Republic that they had start sending Loyalist auxiliaries in to assist the clones. Kraken had been shipped off to Boz Pity to hold the gate of the Confederacy's foundry, and hold the gate he had, for months now.

But Khan... Khan had just returned to Minntooine after two months of commerce raiding, deep behind enemy lines. His supply ship needed to unload its prizes and take on more fuel and armaments, and his destroyers needed repairing. Khan was not the most efficient machine, but he had an understanding of the finesses of violence that Kalani and Kraken and the other K-types had yet to develop. Kalani and Kraken were butchers with the subtlety of a sledgehammer; Khan had the makings of an artist. He had made himself a terror, feared and dreaded as a merciless specter haunting Republic convoys, but he always left survivors to tell the tale and spread his growing legend. And when dealing with the likes of the Corporate Sector, Grievous believed he was the droid to send.

All this, he explained to Khan via hologram. The super tactical droid bowed. "I will lead this invasion, General," Khan said, in a deep voice that had the beginnings of intonation to it.

"You will not be alone," Grievous said. "I am sending my agent with you. She will be in charge of the political aspects of this operation. If they do not listen to her, you will make them pay the price." The droid nodded, and said nothing because nothing needed to be said. "Our new battleship will be launching soon, and I will shortly be on my way to Minntooine. I will brief you both further there."

"Acknowledged, General." Khan saluted, and the hologram shut off.

Grievous cackled quietly to himself, imagining the hammer about to fall on the sniveling sycophants and scheming slavers in his sights. He summoned Dofine to his tower next.

"General," Dofine reported, with a salute.

"What is our status?" asked Grievous.

"The major repairs are done, we no longer need to stay in orbit," he said.

"Excellent. Alert the crew to finish their affairs on the surface, we are leaving in twenty-six hours."

"Yes, sir," said Dofine. "We wouldn't happen to be going to Minntooine, would we?"

"What makes you think that?" Grievous asked.

"There's a rumor going through the fleet of a new battleship launching soon. It would only be fitting for you to be there to see its completion," said the Nemoidian.

"So much for operational security..." Grievous muttered, now aware of yet another problem he couldn't ignore.

The journey from Raxus to Minntooine would have taken two hours in peacetime, a simple hop down the Tion Trade Route to Brigia, and then onto the Giblim Route to Mon Calamari space. These days, though, Loyalist privateers lurked on the backwater hyperlanes that had now become the Confederacy's lifelines in this region of the Outer Rim. The Republic didn't do commerce raiding with its own navy, they hired pirates out of Hutt Space. But the Separatist merchant fleet was formed from the fleets of the commerce guilds who had been fighting pirates for generations; they didn't make themselves easy targets like the Republic's young and green merchant fleet had. There hadn't been pirates in the Core and Inner Rim since the age of the Sith Empire, Dooku once said.

But Grievous erred on the side of caution nonetheless. He took *Invisible Hand* out of hyperspace in random locations, delaying his expected arrival in case anyone knew he was coming. He had Dofine wait a whole hour in interstellar space, just to give any would-be ambushers the slip.

"Isn't this a little paranoid, General?" asked Dofine. "Our reconnaissance drones patrol this route every twelve hours, we'd know if there were any privateers about."

"I am operating under the assumption our enemies know my every movement. They knew where Kenobi was, and if you know *Cataclysm* is about to launch, they must too," said Grievous. "There are many leaks that need to be sealed."

"I take it they'll be sealed with extreme prejudice?"

"Of course, Captain."

After six hours, *Invisible Hand* arrived at the aquatic world of Minntooine. It looked like a perfectly round sapphire from space, shining a placid and rich blue. Only a few scattered island arcs broke the uniform color. The peaceful beauty of the surface was betrayed by the web of shipyards in orbit, and the swarm of ships about them. After the ruin of Pammant, Minntooine was now the second most productive shipyard in the Confederacy, behind Sluis Van of course. They were hailed by the planetary government.

"Welcome to Minntooine, General," said an aged and scarred Karkarodon who appeared on the viewscreen. He was Triodus Mokara, the public face of the Karkarodon junta that had seized power on Minntooine eight years ago. Alongside him was another familiar face: Ricimer Eemon, the young Human from Caramm who had more of a love for logistics and economics than actual fighting, it seemed. Without logistics, though, there would be no war.

"General Mokara," Grievous said. "I am pleased to see you did not eat my officer."

"Our reputation for voracity is only slightly deserved," Mokara said, with a smile that showed his multiple rows of teeth.

"My accommodations have been suitable, sir," Eemon reported. "The Karkarodons are not much for luxury, they'd rather get to the business of winning the war, which I appreciate. They and the Quarren have been most useful."

"Good," said Grievous. "Has Captain Hatha arrived?"

"Captain Hatha is here, yes," Eemon said. "He's touring *Cataclysm* right now."

"How long until the ship is complete?"

Eemon brought a datapad up to his face. "Well, that depends on your definition of complete, sir," he said. "We had her combat-ready two weeks ago, but she had no fuel for the fighters yet, and the armory for the small arms wasn't finished, and... I won't bore you with the details, sir, but she's combat-ready *and* capable of sustained operations now. All the work that's left can be done in the field."

"Excellent," Grievous said, rubbing his hands together. "I will be coming aboard to meet this Hatha."

On the shuttle to the great battleship, the first thing Grievous saw was that the behemoth was unpainted. The entire ship was raw durasteel, a dull silvery-grey. They landed in a hangar, where Eemon, Mokara, and Hatha were. Grievous knew the former two, but Hatha was new. He was a chunky-looking Nemoidian, who appeared strangely lopsided, until Grievous noticed his oversized cybernetic arm, and leg, and eye, all on the left side of his body. *A man not afraid of danger,* thought Grievous. *I like him already.*

"General Grievous, it's an honor to finally meet you," Hatha said, in a rough voice with an accent he'd never heard before.

"Captain Blox Hatha, I'd never heard of you, until recently," Grievous said. He motioned for the Nemoidian to follow him into the ship, and Hatha followed, lurching after him and making a clunking sound every time his cybernetic leg hit the deck. He was not a fast fellow. "You do not sounds like most Nemoidians I've met."

"I'm from the lower class," Hatha said. "Guys like your Captain Dofine, they probably don't think too highly of me. We don't often get to leave the planet. Who else is going to clean the toilets? Droids? You can't shove the cost of materials back on a droid, they don't have money!" He laughed, amused by his own remark.

"I see," said Grievous. "I understand you're a commerce a raider."

"That's right! Four years going now, never been caught, except when I wanted to, of course."

"Four years? The war has been going for three."

"Maybe for you, General, but I got my first letter of marque from Nexus Ortai, ten months before Geonosis, out in the Hertae sector." Hatha clasped the lapels of his big coat, which was hardly necessary in a climate-controlled environment like this. "Yep... Those were the good old days. I stole so much spice from the Hutts, had a dozen bounty hunters after me. But my wife was living like a queen back home! Got the old money in an uproar, we did. I don't take too much contraband like that anymore, though. I'm a military man, now."

Hatha boasted on about his exploits and escapades with the increasingly-present Republic Navy. Early in the war, Republic freighters had traveled alone without escort, easy prey for a raider like Hatha. Their convoy system had given them safety in numbers, something the Separatists already knew from centuries of shipping goods in the Outer Rim, and now the Republic's escorts were growing in number. Or had been, until recently. "They're slowing down their escort production, I think," Hatha said.

"Intelligence does indicate that," Eemon agreed. "They're shifting resources to the new *Imperator*-class of star destroyers. Palpatine seems to have thought victory was only a matter of months away. Escorts aren't worth much in peace time, but those big ships, they make an impression."

"They've misunderestimated us, that's for sure," Hatha said.

As they viewed the ship, Grievous began to notice that *Cataclysm* was a very far cry from *Malevolence.* His former flagship had looked much more... uniform. *Cataclysm* was a complete mess on the inside. Not a single one of her halls had wall panels, and most deck plates were just grates laid over pipes and tubes, threatening to ensnare Grievous's talons with every step. The only solid features were the bulkheads between sections. In several areas, Grievous saw gaping holes cut through the corridors with bundles of conduits squeezed through them. Grievous stopped when he saw a conduit coming up through the middle of the floor, before veering off at a forty-five degree angle into the wall.

"What is this?" he asked Eemon, pointing at the atrocity.

"Well, sir, this ship was only a hulk-"

"No excuses!" Grievous said, standing up straighter. "This ship looks like it was built by children and invalids!"

Eemon, to his credit, didn't cower or pale. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "General, this ship is a massive investment of resources and time. To finish her in two months and preserve vital war material, I had to take shortcuts." Eemon checked his datapad and gestured to the conduit in the middle of the floor. "*This* preserved a hundred meters of conduit piping, which we were able to repair a frigate to operational duty with."

"I mean, if it's battle-worthy..." Hatha shrugged as he trailed off.

"It'll throw any boarders for a loop," said General Mokara.

Grievous growled. "If this ship is lost because of your *shortcuts*, I will cut off your head myself."

"General, I didn't compromise her integrity or fighting ability in the slightest," said Eemon. "The crew roster is two dozen organic officers. None of them are going to come down here. The parts of the ship meant to be inhabited are built more to specifications than this."

"I don't mind at all," said Hatha. "If it works, it works, I say! As long as the seals are tight and the air recyclers are working, I'll be happy. On that note, you should have seen my first ship..."

Grievous was conflicted. For a battleship, *Cataclysm* was certainly looking flimsy. Eemon hadn't even installed the tram system, movement down the central axis of the ship would be done by repulsor sleds in the main corridors. "It saves us several thousand tons of durasteel that will be used for more pressing matters," said Eemon. "Like ship armor."

After the tour of the ship, which ended on the bridge, Eemon reported he'd saved over four hundred thousand tons of material in finishing *Cataclysm* as he had. The great thing about droids, he claimed, was that they didn't care how utilitarian their surroundings were.

"Can we make the back-lighting on the consoles blue?" asked Hatha.

Eemon tapped his datapad, and the lighting of the bridge turned from red to blue. "That's a feature I added. That eye-searing green on *Morning Star* wore on my Human crew, so we came up with a way to change the emitted colors. So depending on what your crew, you can change the colors to whatever you like."

"This is a ramshackle ship you've made, Eemon," Grievous said. "You will be held personally responsible for its fate."

"Including success, sir?" asked the Human.

"You are very confident, aren't you?"

"I'm not nearly stupid enough to build a bad ship for you, sir," Eemon said. "I know what happens to those who fail you."

"Good," Grievous muttered.

Later that day, Grievous summoned the media teams present on Minntooine. There was only one, a Jabiimi student group from Jobreth University's school of journalism, who were making a documentary on the Quarren colonists here. Grievous had them film the launching of the ship and a hasty application of the Confederate hexagon to the otherwise-naked hull. Hatha was kept out of sight of the cameras, to his immense disappointment, since Grievous didn't want the Republic to know who they were dealing with. The students wanted an interview with someone, though, so Grievous gave them Eemon, who'd been more than happy to once he saw *who* would be interviewing.

"Rear Admiral Eemon," began a young woman with short and artificially colored hair, wearing the logo of the Jabiimi National Worker's Alliance on her jacket, "it's come to my attention you're the son of Ado Eemon, the revolutionary who united your world of Caramm twenty years ago."

"Yes, it's true, Sadima," said Eemon, looking proud and puffing himself up. "My father's got too much work to do with the rebuilding back home, so I've come to serve the Confederacy in his place. For the last two months I've overseen the fitting out this ship, using the skills I learned in the logistics corps back on Caramm. We had her done in record time."

"We?" asked Sadima, leaning in closer to him.

"Yes, we," said Eemon, gesturing grandly down to the planet. "I'm only one man, a mere facilitator of parts and materials. The true victory here belongs to the workers, without whose patriotism and zeal this could not have happened."

"Oh, of course," agreed Sadima, head bobbing up and down. "The Quarren here all chose exile and freedom, rather than live in oppression under the king of the Mon Cala," she said. "Do you think the threat of being returned to servitude had anything to do with the amazing feats you all have achieved here?"

"Not just that, my friend," Eemon said. "All the proletariats of Minntooine are working towards something greater than themselves. This is not just a war to bring themselves out of slavery, but to bring all peoples out of slavery! *That* is what were are working to accomplish. Freedom is but privilege extended, unless enjoyed by one and all!"

Sadima the journalism student was enraptured with the young admiral. After the interview, Eemon went off with the woman; she was speaking very excitedly to him about *labor rights* and *galactic revolution,* whatever that was supposed to mean. The rest of the student team seemed torn between admiring him and hating him. "That kid's got game," Hatha remarked to Grievous. "He reminds me of me, when I was his age!"

"I don't think he believed a word he was saying," Grievous said.

"The Human mating ritual is a game of lies and deception, they're central elements of their culture," said General Mokara. "Don't trust Humans."

Later that day, Grievous got about to the business of introducing Komara and Khan for their mission. He returned to *Invisible Hand* and summoned the super tactical droid, whose fleet was also in orbit.

While she had some time off, Esera decided to use her suite's perks and check in with her Sephi friends on Raxus.

"I'm glad everything is going well," Lirka said, her life-size hologram clasping her hands together.

"I was worried, I admit," said Sirka.

Esera hadn't told them anything about her disastrous run-in with the other Jedi. They didn't need to know that. The two ladies thought she was a hero. No one else in the galaxy even remotely had a good opinion of her, besides them. Esera was interested in keeping herself in their good graces. "I may need those formal clothes you wanted to get for me," said Esera to them. "Grievous has a diplomatic mission for me."

"Oh!" Sirka brought her hands to her face, which was lit up by a delighted grin. "Finally! Are you thinking what I'm thinking, sister?"

"She's far too short for Sephi fashion," Lirka said, the wheels in her head clearly spinning. "Nothing long and flowing would look good on her. I'm thinking something sleek and modern, feminine but practical, and still stylish, of course..."

The Sephis had R8 take her measurements with his laser measuring tool, and beamed them straight to Raxus. They'd have their tailor fix something up for her in time for her mission. Esera felt silly for using *Invisible Hand*'scommunications systems for something so trivial, but the Zygerrians were a materialistic people. If she showed up looking like a middle-class Raxulon teenager, they wouldn't even give her the time of day. After she bade Lirka and Sirka farewell, R8 beeped at her.

"Yeah, we're going somewhere," Esera said. "You've been with me this far, right?"

The droid chirped and shook back and forth, like he were nodding.

"I guess you're a friend too, as much as a droid can be. I don't know what I did to deserve this loyalty. I've done nothing but get in trouble since we met."

R8's eye blinked from blue to red and back to blue, and made a low whistle. Esera had no idea what that meant.

"Well, thanks for sticking around," she said, patting the top of his dome.

Not long after, Grievous summoned her to his tower, and revealed she'd be working with a certain super tactical droid.

"Khan?" asked Esera. "I've heard about Kalani, in the intelligence reports back during the Onderon rebellion. I haven't heard of any Khan. And why do all their names start with K?"

"Because they are the K-types," said Grievous, giving her a flat stare.

Khan made his appearance promptly, arriving in Grievous's tower at the exact moment he said he would. Intelligence had indicated that every super tactical droid had a different paint scheme; that seemed to be true. Khan's external plating was black, and his three photoceptors glowed red, giving him a sinister appearance. "You sure he's not the bad guy from some Republic propaganda piece?" she asked Grievous.

"He enjoys playing the part," said Grievous.

Khan stared at Esera. "Esera Komara, Jedi knight, born on the twenty-first day of the twelfth month of the nine hundred and sixty-fourth year by the standard galactic chronology," said the droid. "You have participated in five major engagements against the Confederate Droid Army, four victories to one loss. Below average, for a Jedi. Last reported to be on Shumavar, eight weeks ago."

Esera didn't know how to respond. Should she have been afraid that this droid knew exactly who she was? Did she try to explain she had only held command in one of those battles? Did she wait for Grievous to whack this machine's head off for implying he didn't know who Esera really was?

"Yes, yes, Khan," said Grievous, waving a hand, "you tactical droids are very satisfied with your information network. I knew this already."

"Sir, why is there a Jedi here?" asked Khan.

"Because she isn't a Jedi anymore. She works for me, now."

Khan tilted his head for a moment. "Shall I inform the others of this development, sir? I refrained from attacking her because of your presence, General, but others lack subtlety. They may try to eliminate Esera Komara based on outdated information."

"Your concern is appreciated," muttered Esera.

"Yes, update your network," said Grievous. "She's one of us now."

"Very well, sir."

Grievous projected a map of the northern side of the galaxy and polarized the tower's windows so that the chamber grew dark. "You two will be leading what I call Operation Heist," he said, tracing a blue arrow from Raxus up through Zygerria and into the Corporate Sector. "It is an annexation of several neutral systems and the Republic-aligned Corporate Sector. Our primary purpose is recover materiel and resources for the war effort, and gain a direct link to the Serenno region through its hyperlanes."

"We do not have the fleets or armies to spare for another front, sir," Khan said. "My raiders are not suited to open combat."

"No, they aren't, that's why she's going along," said Grievous, nodding to Esera. "The Jedi pride themselves on being able to solve problems peacefully... I'm giving her a chance to put that into practice."

"My mission is to bring the Zygerrians into the Confederacy peacefully," Esera said. "And negotiate a treaty with the Corporate Sector. If I fail, you terrorize them into compliance, and make them think we're stronger than we are. Smoke and mirrors, as my master would have said. We won't actually have the forces to take and hold anything more than a handful of key systems... which is exactly what we'll do without firing a shot, if all goes well." *But when has anything ever gone right for me?* Esera wanted to add in.

"A cunning plan," Khan said. "There are many risks. I estimate a less than sixty percent chance of success."

"Even one is infinitely more than zero," Esera said.

"Objectively true, but functionally almost meaningless," Khan said back.

"This is the problem with droids," said Esera to Grievous. "They've got no heart."

"Or perhaps we are realists," Khan said.

"Because giving up when the odds aren't in your favor is so-"

"Enough bickering," snapped Grievous. "You have your orders, and will be leaving tomorrow."

"My fighter contingent is gone, sir," said Khan. "I was told the factory will not have any ready for me for another four days at earliest."

Grievous paused, and his eyes darted back and forth like he were reading. He might have been; Esera expected he had a heads-up display built into his eyes. Then, his ear-antennae wiggled, and he looked back to Khan. "I have a solution for that problem. Come with me."

The cyborg led them down to the hangar, where to Esera's surprise, the only other human on the ship was waiting for them. *Miha Voyan! The Vulture droid guy from the medbay!* He looked extremely uncomfortable; he was sweating and the blood had drained from his face. But he stood firm and stared ahead, saluting Grievous when they approached.

"General," Voyan acknowledged.

"Lieutenant Voyan," Grievous said. "What is the condition of our fighter wing?"

"Chewed up sir, but serviceable," Voyan said, standing at attention and still staring straight ahead into the void.

"Khan, how many Vulture droids do you need?" asked the cyborg.

"Six squadrons, sir," said Khan.

"Voyan, can you supply six squadrons from *Invisible Hand*?"

"No, sir," said Voyan, "I cannot. We have four ready to go, and I can have another two up in three days. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Sir, we're short on everything," Voyan said, almost managing to keep the tremble out of his voice. "I'm making repairs with junkyard scrap I picked up on Raxus Prime, sir. One of our Vulture droids has a circuit made from a copper earing I found on the hangar floor when we were at Thyferra, sir."

Grievous loomed above the poor mechanic, and Esera felt a deep sympathy for him. She'd been in his shoes before. This man was doing the best he could in a tight situation, why did Grievous have to torment him so? "And you have not thought to alert me of this?" Grievous finally asked, in a low voice.

Voyan gathered his courage, and Esera gave him what she hoped was an encouraging nod. "Sir," the mechanic said, sweat on his brow, "it is widely known you have stated you are not to be bothered with trivialities."

The cyborg stood silent for a moment, before bringing a hand to what was once his chin. "Yes, that sounds like something I'd say," he said.

"Sir, if you're interested in our affairs in the hangar," Voyan went on, "you should know I think Republic Intelligence has compromised our vulture droid factories on Metalorn, sir. I routinely receive parts and droids of such low quality that I think they were sabotaged on the line, sir."

"Troubling news," Grievous said. "I will speak to Foreman Tambor. Lieutenant, go with Khan and Komara, prepare the two squadrons while you head to your mission."

"Yes, sir," said Voyan.

"Khan, see to it that everything he needs is transferred to your ship," ordered Grievous. "Komara..." Grievous turned to her, and narrowed his eyes. "Try not to lose a hand this time," he finally said, before he whipped about and stalked away. Voyan was immensely relieved, he sighed and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Thanks, General," Esera muttered. But secretly, she had decided she was happy he was finally using her name after weeks of being called *girl* or *Jedi*. Esera held onto that happiness with all her spiritual strength, because if she didn't, she was afraid of what would happen.

"Lieutenant Voyan," said Khan, his deep mechanical voice cutting through her thoughts. Voyan almost jumped when he heard his name. "We must discuss the Vulture droid situation."

"Right, right, of course, sir," stammered Voyan. He and the super tactical droid walked off into the hangar, without giving Esera so much as another glance.

Forgotten immediately. Typical, she thought, frowning at them. Being Esera was a lonely existence.

It was very early on Coruscant. Tarkin had been woken up by a very excited Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence.

"Senator Tarkin!" Orlok's voice yelled at him through the communicator. "Turn on HNN! It's happening!"

"Director, it's three in the morning," Tarkin groaned. "This had better be good."

He switched on the holotank on the wall, already programmed to go straight to the Republic's most trusted news source. Tarkin knew better than to actually trust any media company that called themselves that, of course, but they often broke stories first, and that was enough for him.

On the screen, a great silver leviathan emerged from a web-like shipyard, the white and blue rebel hexagon being the only color on its silver bulk. "Another *Malevolence?*" sighed Tarkin. "What are those idiots on Raxus thinking?"

"It's like in the old stories, Senator, when the a city was about to fall to siege, and the people brought out the corpse of a mighty king of old, and hoped he would lead them to victory again," Orlok said. "But a corpse is a corpse, there was no power there!"

"It is too early for metaphors, Director," Tarkin said.

"Senator, this ship has been on our scopes for two years. We didn't think they were going to do anything with it but scrap the empty hull. For the last two months though, they've been up to something with it. Didn't think they'd come out claiming that the ship was done and ready for battle!"

"Is it?" asked Tarkin, watching the feed switch from the new *Malevolence* to a young Separatist admiral with an immaculately maintained beard talking to some rainbow-haired tart who looked like she'd be at home on the lower levels complaining about worker's rights and anti-alien discrimination. *They're scraping the bottom of the barrel,* he thought.

"No idea, Senator," said Orlok. "Honestly, we're amazed at how quickly they put this thing together. Ricimer Eemon might actually be more than a kid thrown the keys to a carrier by his father."

"Ah, the Eemons, a delightful bunch," said Tarkin, remembering Ado Eemon's admirably efficient and ruthless purges of political opponents, both real and imagined. "Who's captaining this new battleship?"

"Probably Blox Hatha, our agents spotted him arriving at Minntooine a few days ago," Orlok said. "But mark my words, Senator. If they've managed to finish this thing, they aren't anywhere close to being defeated. Grievous is appearing to be an effective motivator, if nothing else."

"I'll be sure to use that in the debate against Organa tomorrow."

Author's note redux: Final term is taking me for a wild ride, my readers, but the good news is I only have a few weeks left unless I spectacularly goof! Which is why this chapter took so long to put out, I'm trying really hard not to goof. I had something I wanted to say about the story, though... what was it? Oh right, time dilation. A few hours passed on Coruscant, a few days in the vicinity of Raxus/Minntooine. I try not to do that but I did that. Oops, sorry for any confusion. Also that dating system I mentioned way back in the notes of chapter 2 or 3 finally came into play. Three year later, oof.

Well, that's all from me. See you all this summer, God willing.

Name:

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